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SUBJECT: CORRECTED COPY: FRANCE LIKES TURKEY... JUST WHERE
IT IS

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Kathleen Allegrone for reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (C) SUMMARY: In the leadup to June European Parliamentary elections, French-Turkish relations are in the media spotlight. Several senior French government officials have vocally underscored their opposition to the Turkish bid for European Union (EU) membership (amid grumbling -- in high places -- about how Turkey handled the selection of NATO's new Secretary General). Although President Sarkozy's opposition to EU membership for Turkey is not news, such a concentrated expression of this policy is raising eyebrows. Many domestic concerns are at play, including Sarkozy's low approval rating, lack of enthusiasm among the French public for the Turkish candidacy, and upcoming European elections. That said, France-Turkey relations, though burdened over the long term by the EU membership question, have continued to make progress. END SUMMARY.

WHAT THEY SAID

12. (C) Following the April 2-3 NATO Summit, President Sarkozy was the first to weigh in on Turkey. In an April 5 interview, immediately following President Obama's expression of support for Turkish EU membership during his speech at the U.S.-EU Summit in Prague, Sarkozy said, "I have always been opposed to (Turkish) entry (into the EU), and I remain so. I believe I can say that an immense majority of member states share France's position." On April 7, Foreign Minister Kouchner told listeners during a radio interview that, although he used to support Turkish EU membership, he no longer did, "because I was very shocked by the pressure exercised on us," referencing Turkish opposition to the selection of Danish PM Anders Fogh Rasmussen as the new NATO Secretary General. On the eve of a visit by Turkey's Minister for EU Affairs, Kouchner walked back a bit from this statement on April 20, saying "I am not against (Turkish EU membership), but I have many more questions than previously." For his part, State Secretary for European Affairs Bruno Le Maire said unequivocally on April 21 "Turkey's place is not in the EU." Privately, the message was not much different. President Sarkozy's Diplomatic Advisor, Jean-David Levitte, told the Charge on April 7 that neither FM Kouchner nor Pierre Lellouche, France's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan and another traditional supporter of Turkish EU membership, maintained this position any more, again citing disappointment with Turkish behavior over the Rasmussen selection.

WHY THEY SAID IT

13. (SBU) The public statements have played into long-running skepticism of Turkey's EU bid by the French public. An April poll by French firm CSA showed that only 35% percent of French surveyed supported Turkish EU membership, while 50% were opposed. These results were similar to polls in 2002

and 2004 (though two polls in 2005, the year of the French "no" vote on the proposed EU Constitutional Treaty, showed slightly higher opposition to Turkish EU membership). Breakdowns of the polling results by political affiliation show that only the extreme left of the French political spectrum is largely in favor of Turkish EU membership. Thus, given Sarkozy's weak public standing (an April poll by TNS-Sofres put his approval at 36%) and his frayed relations with the UMP base over France's NATO reintegration, reminding the French public that he opposes Turkey's entrance into the EU is a political winner. (Note: In fact, Sarkozy's stance against Turkish accession to the EU was a signature issue in his 2007 campaign for national office that set him apart from predecessor Jacques Chirac. End note.)

14. (C) Engin Solakoglu, Counselor at the Turkish Embassy, informed post on April 23 that Turkey had obtained agreement from GOF officials and Francis Bayrou's centrist MoDem party not to use Turkey's EU bid as a political issue during the campaign, since Turkish membership will not be up for consideration during the upcoming session of the European Parliament. The actions of State Secretary Bruno Le Maire seem to be in conflict with this understanding. He initially told the press that Turkey is not an appropriate issue for the European campaign, yet immediately thereafter made his public statement that "Turkey's place is not in the EU" at a public meeting kicking off a local UMP campaign for European elections. "President Sarkozy brought up Turkey to energize his base," suggested Gaetan Gorce, a National Assembly member from the opposition Socialist Party (PS), which officially supports Turkey's bid.

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MARKING OUT DIFFERENCES WITH THE U.S.

15. (SBU) Other pundits note that the recent posturing may be a ploy by French President Sarkozy, who was criticized for alleged concessions to the U.S. on French sovereignty during the NATO reintegration effort, to burnish his credentials as an independent French leader. Stephane Rozes, political consultant and former president of the firm that carried out the most recent Turkey poll, added that, for Sarkozy -- jealous of a perceived loss of the spotlight to President Obama during the G-20 and NATO Summits -- public disagreement with the United States over Turkish EU membership allows him to differentiate himself from the Obama administration. Furthermore, Sarkozy may be gambling that waving the anti-Turkey banner can provide an opportunity for renewed French leadership within the EU, reinforced on this issue by Angela Merkel's Germany. (Note: Certainly, Sarkozy's April 5 statement that an "immense majority" of EU states oppose Turkey's bid seems to be an effort to project the French-German view. End note.) Rozes stated that French public opposition to Turkish EU membership is fundamental and strongly linked to broader opposition to enlargement, which many view as weakening European cohesiveness and identity. Rozes said this argument is consistent with Le Maire's public statement on April 14 that the United States supports Turkish membership based on a vision of the EU as an economic cooperation space, rather than as a strong political and military space.

MORE SMOKE THAN FIRE

16. (C) Seen from the ground, however, the recent French statements have not signaled a broader rupture in French-Turkish bilateral relations. During an April 20 meeting, MFA Turkey Desk Officer Richard Requena said that bilateral relations had gained some momentum during France's EU Presidency in the second half of 2008, when France sent a strong signal to Turkey of its desire for constructive

relations by fulfilling its agreement to open two acquis chapters during its EU presidency. The GOF had also successfully lobbied parliament in 2008 to modify two constitutional amendments in ways favorable to Turkey, one on the Armenian "genocide" question and one on future EU expansion. Requena said the onus is now on Turkey for shows of good faith and commitment to reform before there will be any further improvements in bilateral relations.

¶7. (C) In one positive development, Requena noted high interest throughout France in the upcoming "cultural season" in France highlighting Turkey, with many events scheduled to take place around the country between July and the season's end next March. Both countries are also preparing for possible high-level visits with a possible visit by Prime Minister Fillon to Turkey in July, and President Gul tentatively expected in Paris in early October to open one of the major exhibits of the 2009-2010 cultural season. Regular parliamentary exchanges between France and Turkey are also taking place, including one in May and a trip by French Senate President Larcher to Ankara in September.

¶8. (C) For his part, the Turkish Embassy's Solakoglu said the newly-designated Turkish EU negotiator Egemen Bagis' recent meetings in Paris were characterized by the GOF's sincere insistence that Turkey was a critical partner and that moving forward on bilateral relations was a priority. FM Kouchner reportedly encouraged Bagis to work hard to emphasize freedom of expression and separation of church and state in order to retain the support of center-left Europeans, cautioning that there had been too many recent examples of "Islamism." Although resigned to continuing French opposition to EU membership, at least under President Sarkozy, Solakoglu expressed hope that Turkey could improve its image among the French populace by presenting a modern face at the "cultural season," as well as through the ongoing integration of the ethnic Turkish community in France.

¶9. (C) This same expression of constructive working relations between the two countries also appears to be at play as France continues the process of reintegration into NATO's military command. Francois Richier, Strategic Advisor to President Sarkozy, told Pol M/C on April 10 that the GOF did not expect tensions between France and Turkey as the final modalities on budget and personnel are determined in Brussels. Richier attributed this optimistic outlook to the fortuitous circumstance that having received the promise of additional NATO posts as a quid-pro-quo for acceding to Rasmussen's candidacy, Turkey will be subject to the same internal implementation procedures as France and the GOF

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expects they will be eager to find internal agreement and support for its own new posts.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: Although the apparent loss of support for Turkey's EU bid from certain French officials may signal difficulties for its long-term prospects, the irritations of the Rasmussen affair are unlikely to have any near-term policy repercussions. French opposition to Turkey's desire to join the EU will continue to cast a shadow on their bilateral relationship, but behind the scenes GOF and Turkish officials confirm that they remain actively engaged in constructive bilateral initiatives. For now, post views recent public statements through the prism of internal domestic politics at play in the run up to the European Parliamentary elections. The more negative public focus on Turkey is likely to wane after the electoral calendar is concluded, perhaps being replaced with more positive images resulting from the planned cultural season and possible senior-level bilateral visits this summer and fall. END COMMENT.

PEKALA